

HEROES AND HERETICS:
An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

WEEK 10 **May 1, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Pickens**

Patrick – Missions and Monasticism

Life:

There is a great deal of folklore and uncertainty surrounding Patrick's life. It's unlikely that he drove every snake out of Ireland. However, there are a couple of sources that give us insight into his life and thought. As a real believer and minister in Christ there is plenty to learn from him and appreciate about him.

Patrick was born in Britain near the end of the 4th century AD (~389). His proper name was Magonus Sucatus Patricius. Britain had been under Roman rule for about 350 years at that point. For the most part, as the Roman Empire expanded (in keeping with the practice of the Greeks) they allowed cultures to maintain much of their particular social practices. However, there was a clear centrality of power and status in Rome and the center of the Empire. For this reason, people raised in the upper classes of society even outside of Rome would be schooled according to Roman tradition and familiar with Latin. In his writings Patrick demonstrates an ability to write in Latin. This seems to indicate that he was probably born into the upper classes of society.

Christianity also expanded into Britain. By the end of the 2nd century Christianity had spread enough in Britain that the prominent leaders of the church in Northern Africa mention it in their writings (Tertullian – 160-225, and Origen – 185-254). The British Church was connected to the universal church of the time. In one of his letters Athanasius (296-373) mentions their assent to the Nicene Creed (325). Unfortunately for British pride, the first prominent churchman to come out of Britain is going to be Pelagius. However, the British Church is in line with the broader church as his teachings are declared heretical.

All of this is to say that Patrick was born into a society that was familiar with and influenced by the Christian faith. Patrick comes from a family of faith. His father (Calpornius) was a deacon and his grandfather (Potitus) was a presbyter. It may have been that his family was only nominally Christian. But we can't be certain. In spite of his upbringing Patrick recounts that he didn't come to faith as a child.

In the beginning of the 5th century the Roman Empire is already beginning to see significant trouble. There is political tension within the Empire. More significantly for the British part of the Empire, there are regular significant invasions from Germanic tribes. The central part of the Empire is so pressed that they have to focus on protecting themselves in Italy. For Britain this meant that they were on their own in terms of defending against Germanic raids on the east and Irish raids on the west. When Patrick is 16 years old one of these Irish raids comes to his village and kidnaps him.

At 16 Patrick is stolen away from all that is known to him. He's taken aboard this Irish raiding ship and then sold as a slave in western Ireland. While in slavery he is tasked with the job of shepherding. It's in this desperate time of life that the Lord brings Patrick to himself. "And there [in Ireland] the Lord opened the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my abjection, and mercy on my youth and ignorance."¹

As a shepherd Patrick spends a significant amount of time alone. At that point Ireland was made up primarily of nomadic tribes. He spends a significant amount of time alone and primarily all of his time out in nature. This impacts his Christian life and experience. Later it will go on to impact his way of thinking. "After I came to Ireland—every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed—the love of God and his fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountain; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me—as I now see, because the Spirit within me was then fervent."²

¹¹ Patrick's *Confessions* in Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 140

² *Ibid.*, 140

Patrick continues in this life of slavery for six years. At this point he escapes. We don't know how long or what path his journey took, but at some point he made his way back to his family in Britain. At some point during this period of his life it seems like he spent some time in Gaul, northern France. At the very least during these years Patrick is saturated in the Word of God. He comes to know and cherish Scripture deeply.

As time goes by Patrick has this dream about the Irish people. This burden grows on his heart for the very people who had taken him away as a slave. In 432 Patrick leaves his family in Britain and goes to the very part of Ireland where he was a slave. Patrick would never return to Britain throughout his life. There was some established Christian church in Ireland at that point. Representatives from Ireland had attended at least one church synod. There is mention of a bishop in Ireland. However, the church does seem to exist in a widely pagan context. As Patrick makes his way to Ireland his work is both that of consolidating the church and establishing Ireland as a central hub for missions among the Celtic people.

This is how Patrick wrote of his purpose in ministry: "I came to the people of Ireland to preach the Gospel, and to suffer insult from the unbelievers, bearing the reproach of my going abroad, and many persecutions even unto bonds, and to give my free birth for the benefit of others; and, should I be worthy, I am prepared to give even my life without hesitation and most gladly for his name, and it is there that I wish to spend it until I die, if the Lord would grant it to me."³ In Ireland Patrick's preaching is used mightily. The message of the gospel spreads and many come to faith. "For I am very much God's debtor, who gave me such great grace that many people were reborn in God through me."⁴

While Patrick's evangelistic work flourishes it is ridden with unique difficulties. Some of these difficulties are local and some arise from across the sea. Patrick knew what persecution for the sake of Christ meant. He suffered for his preaching. There were several instances when he felt that his life was in jeopardy. Twice he was imprisoned for his preaching: once for the period of two weeks and another time for an entire month.

There were also those who opposed Patrick's work in the church west of him. In their opposition to Patrick one of the charges that they brought against him was that he did it for financial gain. They accused him of pedaling the gospel for his own profit. Late in life Patrick wrote a work which he entitled *Confessions* in part to answer such accusations. Part of this opposition likely came from a different priority in church government. The Roman Church was very high church. The authority resided in the bishops and increasingly in the bishop of Rome. As Patrick ministered in Ireland the church became increasingly characterized by monasticism.

Patrick spends the rest of his life in Ireland. Through his ministry there Celtic Christianity is consolidated and shaped in many ways. In the 460's he passes away on this island which was very much his home and not at all his home (~461).

Thought:

Patrick was very intentional about the sovereignty of God. He understood God as the one who brings people to himself in faith (Acts 2:47; 16:14). Patrick also understood that it was the Lord who sustained him. Patrick understood the total sovereignty of God as a doctrine of great comfort. "I fear none of these things because of the promises of heaven. I have cast myself into the hands of God Almighty, who rules everywhere, as the prophet says: 'Cast thy thought upon God, and he will sustain thee.'"⁵

Missions were of little concern to the mainstream church in Patrick's time. They would certainly preach the gospel within the Roman Empire; however, for the most part the idea of going out to other nations seems absent. Patrick, with influence of his own experiences, longs to preach the gospel to the furthest parts of the world. "I cannot be silent about the great benefits and the great grace which the Lord has deigned to bestow upon me in the land of my captivity; for this we can give to God in return after having been chastened by him, to exalt and praise his wonders before every nation that is anywhere under the heaven."⁶ At the time Ireland was thought to be one of westernmost parts of the world.

Patrick brings to Ireland a deeply spiritual Christian faith. There is a significant spirituality to Patrick's life. This is likely influenced by his own early experience of being in nature and of long and frequent periods of prayer. In particular, Patrick is significantly influenced by monasticism.

³ Ibid., 141

⁴ Ibid., 143

⁵ Ibid., 144

⁶ Ibid., 144-45

Patrick's ministry is governed by Scripture. He is a man of the Word. That's what guides his thoughts. Scripture is his rule for faith and life. It is what he preaches to others. The literacy of Ireland is even going to be impacted by Patrick and those who follow in his footsteps.

Monasticism characterizes Patrick's view of the Christian ecclesiastical system. Monasticism stressed the value of religion in nature. The natural world was held in fascination as a means of knowing God. Solitude and contemplation are underscored. Monasticism also challenged world status and wealth. These men wouldn't even use horses in their travels. The authority was exercised primarily through abbots who were the heads of monasteries or abbeys. The abbot would be the pastor of his local geographical area. These abbots went so far as to refuse needing the bishop to ordain them for their position. This challenged the authority of the established system.

Take Away:

God is at work in our lives even during the darkest of moments. At times his is at work in our lives especially by means of the darkest moments (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7). Patrick would have never asked to be taken away as a slave. However, you get the sense also that throughout the rest of his life he would have been able to give thanks to God for the way in which God drew Patrick to himself through his slavery. We often don't see how God uses pain and trials in our life in the midst of them. But we may be sure that he always uses such moments for our blessing (Rom. 8:28). The promises of God sustain us and give us reason for hope in the midst of these trails.

There are crazy times in life. There are really dramatic moments. There are significant highs and significant lows. However, for the most part the Christian life is lived in the ordinary day in and day out of life (Ps. 23:2-3). The gospel meets us and nourishes in Christ in very normal and ordinary ways (prayer especially). We are to pray regularly and normally (Eph. 6:18-20). There is an intelligent and yet normalized mysticism in the Christian life (John Murray on fellowship with God). It is at once normal and glorious.

Our mission work and our evangelism should be controlled by love for God and love for others. We should be captivated by God's glory in the gospel. The grandeur of the gospel should compel our sharing it with others. "In the light, therefore, of our faith in the Trinity I must make this choice, regardless of danger I must make known the gift of God and everlasting consolation, without fear and frankly I must spread everywhere the name of God so that after my decease I may leave a bequest to my brethren and sons whom I have baptized in the Lord—so many thousands of people."⁷ We should also be willing to go to great lengths in love to share this gospel of salvation to those who are lost (Rom. 10:5-17; Phil. 3:17-20).

For Further Reading:

Dowley, Tim. *The History of Christianity*. Minneapolis: Lion Publishing, 1990.

Haykin, Michael A. G. *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2011.

McGrath, Alister E. *Historical Theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998.

⁷ Ibid., 146